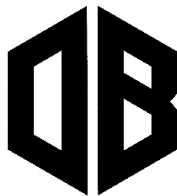


# Into What Splendor

By Jack Dublin

Illustrated by Winners of the *Into What Splendor*  
Illustration Contest

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**OLDENWORLD BOOKS**

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## Chapter 1

# The Feast of Apples

“The Stoddard farm is a paradise because I make it so,” declared Tyce—a field mouse—to the glowering West Ender in front of him. “That affords me leeway where the rules are concerned. It entitles me to a thicker slice of the apple.”

The West Ender to whom Tyce said this—a short-snouted mouse with blotchy fur—continued to carve the dried apple with a sliver of glass. He didn’t flinch, or blink, or wiggle a whisker. In fact, it seemed he’d shorted Tyce his portion to provoke the East Ender in just this way.

“So, he’s entitled, is he?” The West Enders behind the apple-slicer squeaked with laughter. “Last I knew, East Enders have no part with West Enders. Except, that is, for these friendly nights of casting twigs. But you’re not acting friendly, Mr. Tyce.”

Rules regarding the casting of twigs, and the Feast of Apples that followed it, clearly stated that only twig-casters were entitled to fruit. Tyce knew this. He was the Keeper of the Ledger and recorder of all the rules on the farm. His place in the event, however, was to seal and settle wagers between the bettors. So, technically, the West Ender was in the right.

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But Tyce was having none of it. He was hungry. He raised the ledger above his head. “Have you forgotten the Larder Rules?”

The squeaking West Enders faded into silence. The East Enders, who up to this point had been hesitant to join the fray, tittered at the brilliance of Tyce. Love him or hate him, he was one of their own.

“I have not,” said the West Ender, “but I swear by the Black Swan you won’t wield it as a bludgeon on me.”

An uneasy murmur rippled through the crowd.

“It’s funny how these things work, isn’t it?” Tyce spoke with confidence, but his eyes betrayed him. They were scanning for a gap through the West Enders in case he needed to run for it. “You cross me like this and I’ll cross you off the list.”

“Down with you!” The West Ender charged Tyce, bowling him into the hay and raising the sliver of glass in the air.

“Enough!” A booming voice came from nowhere and everywhere at once. The West Enders and East Enders alike pressed close to the walls, like castaways swimming for the safety of shore.

A mammoth rat lumbered out of the shadows, fixing Tyce’s attacker with satin black eyes.

“What business do you have with Mr. Tyce?”

The West Ender carefully stepped off Tyce and backpedaled to the far wall. “None, sir. None at all. Just being on my way!”

“Then be on it—*faster!*”

The West Enders scabbled over each other for any exit they could find.

When the dust settled, Tyce stood to shake the hay from his body.

“That was a close one, Anvil. I owe you.”

“Six raids this time,” said the rat. “If there’s a next time, it’ll cost you seven.”

“As you say,” said Tyce, skipping to a knot hole in the wall of the shed. “Six raids this time, seven the next. See you in a moon!”

## Chapter 2

### Henrietta's Wager

The Stoddard farm covered a peaceful swath of the valley, with a rugged lane winding through it. At the north end of the lane, where it dead ended into the hay fields, an old pickup truck rusted into the ground. Beyond that, a pond shimmered with the stirrings of fish, bullfrogs, and water skimmers. At the south end stood a farmhouse with murky windows awash in candlelight. Opposite the house, to the left of the lane, stood a barn with a rusted weather vane on its peak that rattled in the spring breeze. Several side planks, rotted by summer sunshine and winter rains, had long ago fallen away, leaving a wide breach into the midnight air. Behind this breach, an owl named Henrietta perched in the rafters, watching over the fields for mice.

Henrietta's feathers were a jigsaw of colors—coppers, grays, and whites. They resembled the battle-born armor of a medieval knight, which suited her well because she was no flinch and all fight. She wore the colors with pride.

On this night, however, Henrietta had spied no mice. Only a tomcat. A shiftless vagabond making his way through the fields. Up to no good, she reckoned; he was one to keep an eye on. But no sooner had she sighted him than she lost sight of him. Then she heard the caterwauls of another cat—Jules, no doubt. She was the only other cat on the farm, a pet of the farmer and farmer's wife.

And later, after the yowls subsided, Henrietta heard a rustling in the hayfields and slipped silently from her perch, adrift on the air. It was her call to dinner. Her prey was afoot.

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Tyce pranced through the field—plucking and smelling a flower as he went—the hay towering above his head. He was a curious-looking creature, for unlike any mouse you might have seen, this one walked on two legs and whistled as he went. He carried his ledger in hand and kept a pencil tucked between his ear and a flat cap. It's worth noting he also wore knickerbockers and a fancy waistcoat (fancy for a field mouse, anyhow) so that he cut a rather distinguished figure.

He was in high spirits after the Feast of Apples. A challenge to his authority, like the silly stunt by the West Ender, was good for business. It provided Tyce the opportunity to remind the rodents who actually ran the farm. On top of that, he'd made a neat little fortune from the twig casters. He didn't cast twigs himself (he wasn't keen on gambling), but he took wagers on which fellow would win the cast. By sealing the wagers he was entitled to a cut of the spoils. It was a far surer way to make a profit than casting twigs.

Tyce paused to reach into his pocket for an almond he had earned that evening. One of the East Enders had swiped it from the Farmer's larder. An almond was a rare treat to be had on the farm, not only because the Farmer didn't keep

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many almonds in the larder, but because all the rodents followed strict rules regarding raids on the larder:

Rule #1: only three mice, or one rat, permitted in the larder on any day.

Rule #2: no eating in the larder.

Rule #3: take only what you can carry to your nest under your own strength.

These were the Larder Rules. They were simple rules to keep the rodents from behaving greedily. Break those rules and the farmer's wife would get wise to their scheme. As the old rhyme prophesied, the carving knife would not be far behind.

Keeping Larder Rule #1 involved a careful accounting of the comings and goings of every mouse and rat in the valley. Only a patient mouse with a penchant for details could manage such a schedule. A mouse like Tyce.

So, besides profiting from taking wagers on the casting of twigs, he also profited from keeping the Larder Rules. If a fellow offered him a bit of the spoils, Tyce ensured his name appeared on the larder raid schedule more often than it should. But again, as with Larder Rule #3, the key was to not get greedy. If Tyce ever did that, he'd have more to fear than the farmer's wife—every rodent in the valley would want a piece of his hide.

Tyce nibbled his almond and resumed his stroll through the hay. He hadn't gone far when something caught his

attention overhead. A patch of stars seemed to vanish—then reappear.

He stopped cold, but his whiskers continued to wiggle. “Black Swan—it’s Henrietta!” he said under his breath. “I should have stopped taking wagers sooner. Larder Rule #3, old boy—never get greedy!”

When he thought of this, Henrietta swooped out of the sky.

Tyce tripped over his feet in a mad dash for one of his secret runs dug into the field. Henrietta didn’t know about these runs and fortunately the full moon cast valuable shadows through the hay that lent him cover until he reached the entrance of one nearby. He dived into it and laid still. Even at rest, his heart thumped, and his whiskers wiggled against his will.

Outside the hole, Henrietta scratched with her talons and struck with her beak. But Tyce had tucked himself deep in the run, beyond her reach. After several fruitless attempts to reach the mouse, Henrietta screeched and took to the air.

Tyce waited a long while before he dared to continue down the run. One could never be too careful when dealing with Henrietta. Her craftiness was legendary; almost as legendary as his own.

*That was too close,* thought Tyce. *Black Swan, that was close!*

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Jules sprang onto a tree stump to watch the chase. But like so many times before, Tyce outwitted the owl. Jules had been on the losing side of hunting Tyce, too; too many times than she cared to remember. Henrietta landed atop an electricity pole next to the stump and screeched in frustration.

“It’s as if he vanishes into thin air,” she said to herself as much as to Jules.

Amused, Jules flicked her tail. “What’s the matter, old girl? Did Tyce get the better of you again?”

“He’s got the better of you more times than me.”

“Perhaps,” Jules said, licking her paw in the moonlight. “But I wager I’ll get him before you.”

Henrietta said nothing. She sat perfectly still atop the pole, scanning the field in vain for Tyce. He had performed one of his miraculous disappearing acts for the long night and was unlikely to show his snout until sunrise. After a while, she looked down at Jules.

“A wager, you say?”

“It was only a figure of speech, Henrietta. But if you’re willing to lose something of value, I’m keen to make the wager. What are you thinking, old girl?”

Henrietta responded so quickly that Jules suspected she had been considering the wager for a long time.

“Each day, one of us will hunt Tyce. I hunted him tonight, so tomorrow you will hunt. We’ll alternate hunting days like this until one of us gets that pompous little ball of lint.”

“And when I win?”

“If you win.”

“What shall I win?”

Henrietta didn't answer right away. The long pause suggested she was being careful not to wager too much. But even a long pause can be deceiving. She said, “The victor wins exclusive hunting rights to the mice.”

Jules let out a long whistle. “Do you mean rights to just the East Enders, or the West Enders, too?”

“All of them.”

“For how long?”

“An entire moon.”

Now Jules fell silent as she counted the cost of the wager. She flicked her tail. “What of the rats?”

“What of them?”

“I want them, too.”

“Black Swan! Sole rights to the mice *and* rats? What would the loser eat? I don't want you to starve, Julesy. I have something of a soft spot in my heart for you.”

“Rubbish! You'd eat me if you could.”

“Quite true,” Henrietta conceded. “Then perhaps it's the empty spot in my belly I'm thinking of.”

Jules stood and arched her back, ending her stretch with a tremble in her body. She sat down, grinning up at Henrietta.

“I'll take the wager on one condition: the loser eats nothing but snakes for a moon.”

“Snakes? A snake will do in a pinch, but who could stomach such a diet for so long?”

“Afraid you'll lose?”

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“I’m afraid I’ll win, and you’ll grow scaly and emaciated from your diet. There aren’t many snakes in these fields, you know. Far fewer than mice and rats.”

“Is it a wager?”

Henrietta scanned the hay field one more time. *Tyce has bested me again*, she thought. *The blasted mouse is really gone.*

“Oh, drats—I should know better than falling in league with you, but count me in.” Henrietta ruffled her feathers, wondering if she’d catch anything to eat that night. “So, tell me, Julesy—how do you suppose we seal this wager?”

Jules purred and sprang from the stump into the darkness. She called over her shoulder, “I know the perfect one for the job.”

## Chapter 3

### Skin in the Game

The next morning, Jules and Henrietta presented themselves to the barn animals. Guthrie, the mother goat, seeing the serious expressions on the cat's and owl's faces, shooed her kids out of the barn. She was glad she did after the girls explained their plan.

"On the farm, everything written in the ledger is gold," Jules explained. "*He* has to write our wager in there too, so that we have a record of it. It must be him."

Portwine, the old boar, listened to the cat's reasoning in respectful silence. Poppy, his mate, pretended not to listen as she pawed at a beetle in the mud. And Guthrie—well, Guthrie chewed a mouthful of hay so that she wouldn't blurt out what she thought of their awful scheme.

The other animals in the barn, including a rat hunting for scraps in the pig trough and a chicken peeking through a knot hole in the wall, marveled at Jules's wisdom.

She saw things other creatures didn't see.

She saw that while Tyce scratched marks in his ledger, his authority increased. If he recorded the wager in the ledger, no one would accuse Jules or Henrietta of being cruel. Not the mice, not the pigs, not the chickens, and not the goats. The rats might, but what else was new? It was a simple wager, like any other wager, and who better to seal it than the Keeper of the Ledger?

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“She’s right,” Guthrie concluded. “It has to be Tyce. The only question is, which of us will carry this unseemly proposition to him?”

“Shall we cast twigs?” Portwine asked.

“I suppose there’s no other option,” Guthrie said.

“Enough about twigs,” Poppy interjected. “I’ll go to him.”

“No, no, no,” Portwine stammered. Then, as if he had not made himself clear, he added, “No.”

“Portwine’s right, Poppy,” said Guthrie. “This is a hefty matter best left to someone with more seasons under hoof than you.”

“Such as the two of you? Just listen to yourselves—*casting twigs*. I’m concerned neither of you could so much as broach the issue, much less broach it in the delicate manner required.”

“She has a point,” Portwine conceded.

“Oh, she has a most valid point,” Henrietta said. “And I think Jules and I agree on this: Poppy will be the one to go. It can be no one else.”

“Agreed,” Jules said. “Make us proud, girl.”

“I’m simply the messenger, Jules. This scheme of yours is liable to infuriate Tyce to no end. Who knows what his response will be? You’ll be lucky to be a byword on his tongue after this.”

“No, he’ll be dinner on my tongue after this. Now, chop-chop. It’s my hunting day!”

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After Jules returned to the fields, and Henrietta ascended to her perch in the rafters, Poppy left the side of a dozing Portwine and walked outside the barn. She didn't have a hard time finding Tyce—he was reclined in the sun atop a wood pile, nibbling a cracker.

When Poppy explained the matter of the wager to Tyce, he nearly choked.

“They want me to do what?”

“I tried talking them out of it, but it's no use. They've settled their hearts on the matter.”

“Who put them up to it?”

“What do you mean who put them up to it?”

“Young girl, you may be a bit naïve as to how things work on the farm. You see me as the Keeper of the Ledger and of the Larder Rules. Let's be honest—I'm an influential creature on this farm. It's only natural you should hold me in high esteem. But you may not realize I have a few enemies.”

“No! You?”

“Yes, even me. It happens to the best of us. Even you, Poppy, have an enemy or two.”

“Me? Why would I have enemies?”

“You're all sweetness and light. Some creatures take exception to that. But that's neither here nor there. Now think, Poppy. Did they say who put them up to it?”

“Well, no, I don't think it's like that at all. I think it's because Henrietta is an owl and Jules is a cat. That's what they do—they eat mice.”

“Yes, but why seal a wager then? Why not just eat me?”

“Because... because they *both* want to eat you.”

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“How dare they—I’m truly hurt! I thought I had a good rapport with the girls.” Tyce crushed his cracker in hand and scattered the crumbs to the ground. “That will teach me a lesson about being nice.”

“I told them you would react this way.” Poppy turned to go. “I shall convey your refusal.”

Tyce leaped in front of the barn door, blocking her entrance. “You will do no such thing! Listen, did they say what’s in it for me?”

“What’s in it for you? Tyce, they’re sealing a wager against your life. There’s nothing in it for you but a date with the Black Swan. This is madness!”

“Of course it’s madness, young girl. But even in madness there’s something to be gained.”